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Misled by CIA, Democrats charge in secret House session

By ALFONSO CHARDY
Herald Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON — In an extraordinary secret session, the House of Representatives on Tuesday heard the chairman of its intelligence oversight committee charge that the CIA had misled Congress, and call for an end to covert U.S. assistance to Nicaraguan guerrillas.

Using maps of Nicaragua and Honduras, but apparently revealing no new information, the Democrats on the oversight committee built a case for ending the CIA venture in Central America, said congressmen who attended the session.



Boland

The meeting — four hours and 17 minutes of closed-door debate on a bill to cut off CIA funds for the operation — was only the third time in 153 years that the full House has gone into secret session.

House members said later that the Democratic committee majority, in briefing their fellow congressmen on the CIA campaign, had accused the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency of misleading Congress.

Committee Chairman Rep. Edward Boland (D., Mass.) said that CIA Director William Casey originally told the oversight panel that his agency planned to create a small but efficient guerrilla force to interdict alleged Nicaraguan arms shipments to guerrillas fighting the U.S.-backed government of El Salvador.

Boland and three other intelligence panel members — Norman Minetta (D., Calif.), Lee Hamilton (D., Ind.) and Wyche Fowler (D., Ga.) — told the House that Casey also had indicated that military pressure on the Sandinistas would force them to "look inward" and reconsider their harsh Marxist policies.

Boland and the others said, however, that they now have concluded that the CIA went beyond its original mandate in creating a sizable counterrevolutionary army bent on overthrowing the Sandinistas.

The covert operation also failed in that there is no solid evidence that the "contras" captured or destroyed any large caches of weapons destined for El Salvador, the Democrats said.

Two Republican members of the intelligence panel, C.W. Young of Florida and Kenneth Robinson of Virginia, later rejected the Democrat position and contended that the CIA and the Reagan Administration were still honoring commitments made to the committee.

Young argued later that everything the CIA is doing in Nicaragua "was supported by the intelligence committee from the very beginning, and consequently would be very difficult to pull back from."

Rep. Thomas Harkin (D., Iowa), the first congressman to propose halting the CIA operation and to call for the secret session, said covert aid must be ended to "send a signal to the administration" that it must change its policies in Central America.

"If anything," he said, "the secret session convinced me of two things: first, we cannot continue to sow death and destruction throughout Central America and at the same time legitimately ask for peaceful negotiations; secondly, we have to end all covert activities in and against Nicaragua, not so much as a friendly gesture to Nicaragua, but really in our own best interests, because what we are doing down there is not in keeping with the best character of the American people, nor with our ideals."

A vote on the bill to cut off funds for the CIA campaign — authored by Boland and Clement Zablocki (D., Wis.) — may come next week.

The bill would create an "overt" \$80 million fund to help "friendly" nations in Central America to intercept Cuban and Nicaraguan weapons supplies to leftist guerrillas.

Meanwhile, Reps. Dante Fascell and Dan Mica, both Florida Democrats, prepared a compromise that would allow the covert operation to continue until the Sandinista government stops aiding the Salvadoran guerrillas.

Just before the House closed its doors for the secret session, four Democratic congressmen just back from Central America — Mike Lowry of Washington, Don Edwards and George Miller of California and Les AuCoin of Oregon — said the United States could look forward to "years of deepening involvement" in the wars of the region unless Congress stops the covert aid to the Nicaraguan rebels and ends or considerably reduces military aid to the government in El Salvador.